

SOFTWARE LABS

Boost your brainpower

You may feel that your computer is frazzling your brain, but your PC can actually help you increase your brainpower. Mike Bedford looks at the products that will make you think

It's often said that computers are dumb since all they can do is follow a set of instructions. People, however, are capable of a whole range of thought processes far beyond the capabilities of a computer. So it may sound strange to suggest that your PC can help you improve your thought processes, yet that's exactly what the software presented here claims to do.

We have reviewed courseware that shows you how to "think outside of the box", but that's just a start.

There's also software to improve your sequential processing skills, improve your memory, test your IQ and natural aptitudes, plus a couple of mind-mapping packages that help you organise your thoughts and make productive use of information.

Scientists believe we use only a small proportion of our brains' total capacity. The software and websites here will help you to press the odd extra per cent or two into service, revolutionising the way you think.

KOGAN PAGE The Times Test Your IQ Volume 1

★★★★

£11 inc VAT

You can improve your performance in IQ tests with practice and, since these tests are sometimes used in job interviews, mastering them would certainly be beneficial.

This set of IQ tests will give your brain a workout and let you know how you're progressing.

There are two types of test: short practice tests with no time limits and timed tests of 40 questions that give you an IQ score. At the end of each test you're shown the answers. The headline figure of over 1,200 questions is impressive, although they tend to fall into a limited number of basic formats.



▲ Test your brainpower with a Mensa IQ test

IQ SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/NT/XP, 133MHz processor, 32MB RAM, 34MB disk space
SUPPLIER Kogan Page 020 7278 0433

DETAILS www.kogan-page.co.uk

- ✓ Excellent value for money; lots of questions
- ✗ Limited types of question

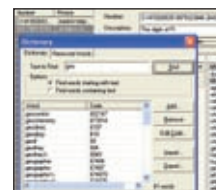
SWEETSCAPE SOFTWARE 010 Memorizer

★★★★

\$20 (around £11)

010 Memorizer helps you remember numbers such as phone numbers, postcodes, dates, PINs or passwords. You could argue that it's just a trick, but it's one that many people will find useful.

The idea is to convert the number into a word and create an association in your mind between the words and the number you're trying to remember. The software presents a list of possible words that can be used to represent a number. For short numbers you could do it by hand, but for long numbers or sequences, number automation is essential.



▲ Did you know that pi corresponds to 'Madrid helping shalom'?

MEMORY SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/NT/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 32MB RAM
SUPPLIER Sweetescape Software sales@sweetescape.com

DETAILS www.sweetescape.com/010memorizer

- ✓ Simple concept; easy to use
- ✗ Remembering phrases can be tricky

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Website

The Test Site

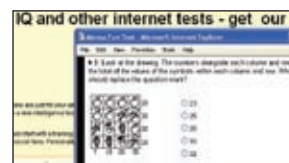
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2H.COM The Test Site

★★★★★

www.2h.com

This website is different from the other products reviewed here in that it's geared towards testing rather than improving your brainpower. However, a bit of time spent putting your mind through its paces should reveal your strengths and weaknesses, helping you decide where you need to put in that bit of extra effort.



◀ Get the low-down on all aspects of your mind and personality

The site is a selection of links to tests on third-party sites. It's far better maintained than most link-intensive sites, though, as we didn't unearth a single broken link. As well as IQ tests, there are also personality, emotional intelligence, aptitude and entrepreneurship tests.

- ✓ Varied content; well-maintained links
- ✗ No improvement tools

IDEA FOCUS Serious Creativity

★★★★★

£69 inc VAT

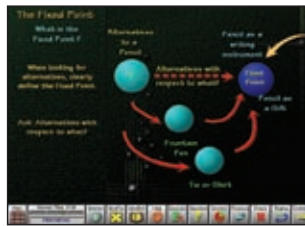


Edward de Bono is one of the foremost experts in the field of lateral thinking and has written numerous books on the subject. Serious Creativity is a self-paced course presented by de Bono on how to "think out of the box" and thereby generate alternative ideas. This doesn't come naturally and can only be perfected by learning specific techniques of lateral thinking.

The course is divided into nine modules, with intriguing titles such as Alternatives, Focus, Challenge and Harvesting. The modules are narrated by de Bono, they are easy to listen to, have relevant graphics and last about 45 minutes each. Each module includes various exercises as well as a series of questions to test your comprehension.

However, the courseware is only part of the Serious Creativity software. Also in the package is a utility, IdeaPro, that you can use as part of the course and can be put into service afterwards as you start to use the techniques of lateral thinking in everyday situations.

At £69, Serious Creativity is good value for professional users but a bit pricey for home users, especially since the licence allows only one person to use it. This is a shame since creative thinking is a technique that can be applied to many areas of life, not just in business.



▲ Let Edward de Bono teach you how to "think outside of the box"

SUMMARY

- ✓ Written by a recognised expert
- ✓ Well presented
- ✓ Bundled software utility
- ✗ Expensive for home use

THINKING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 3.1/95/98/NT/Me/2000/XP, 50MHz 486 processor, 8MB RAM (16MB recommended), minimal disk space (runs from CD)
SUPPLIER www.trainingwarehouse.co.uk
DETAILS www.ideafocus.com/products/serious/_serious.htm

ADVANCED BRAIN TECHNOLOGIES BrainBuilder 3.0

★★★

£40 inc VAT



▲ Improve your sequential processing with BrainBuilder

According to the BrainBuilder user guide, sequential processing – an element of short-term memory – is our ability to receive, hold, process and use information in an orderly way. It's essential for learning and verbal communication and for many mental processes. BrainBuilder provides tools to help you improve this ability and chart your progress.

In practice, this is achieved through six basic activities, three of which are visual and three verbal. In the Visual Base activity, you are shown number sequences of increasing lengths that you have to remember and type in, while in Auditory Reverse you hear number sequences that you have to enter in reverse order. We'll have to take it on trust that practice in this area genuinely does make perfect, and we could have done without the 'professor's' inane words of encouragement after each and every question.

You're encouraged to use the exercises on a regular basis and, if you do, you can view your progress on a series of graphs, one for each of the activities. There is also something called a Brain Log that lets you score yourself for health, sleep, diet, exercise and focus so you can see how these factors are helping or hindering your progress in this field.

SUMMARY

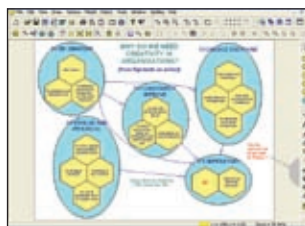
- ✓ Easy learning curve
- ✗ Expensive
- ✗ Audio can be annoying

MEMORY SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, 486 processor, 8MB RAM, 16MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.learning-solutions.co.uk
DETAILS www.advancedbrain.com/bb_intro.asp

INSPIRATION RESOURCES Visual Concept

★★★★

£115 inc VAT



▲ Connect your ideas together for improved productivity

Visual Concept is one of two products included in this round-up that allows you to present thoughts and ideas as a 'mind map', which is used to aid thinking and using information more productively. A mind map is a diagram with ideas connected by arrows that show the relationships between them. They can be used for brainstorming, planning, learning and many other applications.

Visual Concept is essentially a drawing package, although its facilities are tailored specifically to creating mind maps. It allows you to lay down ideas – mostly boxes of various shapes containing descriptive text – and join them up using arrows. The publishers are at pains to point out that mind maps should not be unduly large or complicated, so to help you keep them to manageable proportions, it provides a means of organising them in a hierarchical structure. A single box in a mind map can therefore represent another mind map, which is opened up if you double-click on it. A number of templates are provided for specific tasks such as brainstorming, conflict resolution or creating time-planners.

Visual Concept is a competent product, but not an exciting one. If you want a package that will produce visually attractive mind maps that you can use as an aid to learning, you'd be advised to look elsewhere.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Supports hierarchical mind maps
- ✗ Expensive
- ✗ Limited drawing features

MIND-MAPPING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 95/98/NT/Me/2000/XP, 266MHz Pentium processor, 16MB RAM, 2.5MB disk space
SUPPLIER www.logovisual.com
DETAILS www.visual-concept.co.uk

CAMBRIDGE SOFTWARE PUBLISHING Cornerstone: Visual Thinking

★★★★★

£87 inc VAT (download;
£116 inc VAT for CD version)



▲ Mind-mapping software with visual appeal

Like Visual Concept, this software is basically a specialised drawing package that allows you to present your ideas graphically.

Visual Thinking provides a lot more drawing features than Visual Concept. In addition to the basic shapes such as boxes and ovals, you can draw your own shapes, choose from the selection of clip art or import an image from a file. Most people find it easier to remember pictures than words, so using appropriate images for ideas is a useful facility. Other nice features include the ability to link to other documents and a means of exporting your finished mind map as a Word document, a PowerPoint presentation, as a picture or in HTML.

Hierarchical mind maps aren't specifically supported as they are in Visual Concept but, since you can add links to other documents, you can do much the same thing by adding a link to another Visual Thinking file. The end result has a very polished appearance, even down to the shape and positioning of the arrows. This could help provide that vital extra bit of impact in a business presentation.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Sophisticated drawing features
- ✓ Attractive end result
- ✓ Supports hyperlinks

MIND-MAPPING SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/2000/XP, 333MHz Pentium processor, 256MB RAM, 90MB disk space
SUPPLIER Cambridge Software Publishing 01223 425558
DETAILS www.camsp.com/cornerstone